

Adapting the Empty Orchestra: the Performance of Play in Karaoke

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ABSTRACT

Karaoke is a unique social game of performance play that is easily adapted into existing play forms and play communities. In this paper, we examine how karaoke is encountered by players, how the game is structured, and how karaoke is adapted by play communities by evaluating the ludic elements of karaoke and the playful methods players use to engage with the game, ending with critical examples of playful adaptations. The success of the informal play experience of karaoke can inform the design of more intentional social play. We argue that karaoke is so adaptable because of its ubiquitousness, its relative lack of explicit rules, the flexibility of its implicit rules, the personal nature of its goals, and the variability of its primary mode of play. This creates a loose structure that can take in other structures, be incorporated by them, or even completely consumed by them, yet remain recognizable.

Keywords

Game Design, Performance Play, Playful Adaptations, Emergent Play

INTRODUCTION

It's a Saturday night like any other. We're out, once again, at our favorite bar for a bite to eat, a night of drinking, and some excellent karaoke. The crowd, on this particular evening, is pumped. The KJ, Kevin Karaoke, is up on stage with one of the singers, jamming on his guitar while the singer head-bangs along. We jump and bump and drink the night away, singing loud and awful into the air for everyone to hear. This is play. But it isn't just wild, free play, though that's certainly part of the equation. There's a structure here. There are rules. Some of those rules are plain and clear, like how to sign up to sing. But most of the rules have gone unsaid, and yet, here we all are, a playful cacophony of self-expression writ large, harmonious and inclusive. This is the game of karaoke. What is this game of playful performance? How does a game so loosely ruled stay together? Where are its edges and how does it fall apart? What are the implications of its arguably emergent structure? In this paper, we identify karaoke as an activity structured into a particular kind of casual simulation game, with New Games aesthetics, that is particularly adaptable and flexible thanks to its ludic structure. Our initial foray into the game of karaoke raises an important series of questions about the intersections between social play, casual games, and performance that current game studies discourses cannot fully address. From a design perspective, focusing on the structures of play in karaoke gives us a

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critical lens for considering intentional design interventions into the lived experience of social play like karaoke, the novel media ecologies that grow around it, and the consumption cultures that adapt its structures.

BACKGROUND

In this paper we report on some of the results of our ongoing and extensive participant observations of karaoke. When karaoke began in the United States, it was commonly seen as a stepping-stone toward rockstardom (Drew 2001). Though a Japanese import, karaoke was quickly adapted to an American audience (Drew 2001). Thus, as karaoke became a more known phenomenon, notions of stardom have faded and instead karaoke has become a form of leisure entertainment meant to draw crowds to venues. As such, the game of karaoke as discussed in this paper focuses on the version(s) of karaoke encountered in the United States or even more specifically the version(s) as experienced mostly in Orange County, California. To that end, fundamentally, the karaoke discussed here is a social game— while it is possible to play karaoke alone, this paper is concerned only with the social game of karaoke played in public spaces.

To our knowledge, nothing has been written about karaoke within the game studies community. The small body of related karaoke scholarship has focused on software and hardware system architectures, ethnographic work describing the shape of this social phenomenon, and identity performance within and through karaoke. In software and hardware design, this includes everything from equipment designs to augment performance quality (Cano et al. 2000) to system designs for streamlining karaoke (Yu et. al 2008). In the humanities and social sciences, studies of karaoke often focus on the performance of identity and the navigation of gendered performances (Brown 2009, 2014)(Lum 2012)(Tongson 2012, 2018), karaoke in popular culture (Gonda 1993)(Fornäs 1994)(Kelly 1997)(Kessler & Tongson 2014)(Peters et al. 2018)(Tongson 2011, 2015), and karaoke in leisure studies (Drew 1997, 2004, 2005)(Kelly 2005). In *Karaoke Nights* Rob Drew explores the initial growth of karaoke in the US, and the social structures that have formed around it (2001). More recently, Kevin Brown provides an updated look at karaoke and identity formation in the US (2015). And internationally, there are several works focused on globalization, local adaptation, and cultural expression through karaoke (Adams 2013)(Kelly 1998)(Mitsui & Hosokawa 2005)(Ong 2009)(Ugresic & Williams 2011)(Zhou & Tarocco 2007). While many of these studies consider or vaguely reference the notion of play as it connects to the nature of performance (playing an instrument, playing with the knobs, performing in a play, etc.), there is no particular evaluation of playful behaviors within karaoke, or of karaoke as a game.

Research Methods

This paper is built around over 600 hours of participant observations of play in karaoke venues across Orange County, California as well as several venues in Los Angeles, California, Orlando, Florida, Austin, Texas, Cedar City, Utah, Murray, UT, and Powell, WY. Most of these observations were made from the winter of 2017/2018 through the spring of 2019, though some observation locations were visited months prior. These observations initially focused on the power dynamics and methods of control wielded by the Karaoke Jockey (KJ), the karaoke play facilitators, across multiple venues, including venues in which the KJ is excluded, though as the research expanded, the observational focus shifted to include play behaviors exhibited

by participants, and playful adaptations of karaoke by play communities. All observations were made in public spaces and only KJs' names made publicly available during the course of said games of karaoke, often in the form of stage names, are included in this paper.

GAME PARADIGMS

In what way can Karaoke be understood to be a game? Does it satisfy any of the accepted definitions of games currently circulating through the games research community? For this work we adopt an expansive view of games, pulling from prior definitions as outlined in Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's *Rules of Play*, drawn from the work of David Parlett, Clark Abt, Johann Huizinga, Roger Callois, Bernard Suits, Chris Crawford, Greg Costikyan, and Elliot Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith (2004, 72-80). Salen and Zimmerman, after synthesizing the various definitions, define a game as "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" (80). We find this definition to be appropriately expansive enough to include most categories of games, however we are also aware of a long history of cooperative games that pointedly avoid conflict as a design goal (Pearce et al. 2007). Further, we feel focusing on conflict rather than play misses the mark. So, we adapt their definition, focusing on play rather than conflict, defining a game as *structured play according to formalized rules toward one or more goals*. We are not claiming this definition as all encompassing ontology but rather an appropriate synthesis of relevant definitions, toward a different purpose, perhaps, that can be used to explore various play phenomena that are both rules structured and approach goals differently, like karaoke does.

In terms of formalized structures, karaoke can first be understood as a *simulation game*. *Simulation games* can be defined as "a very diverse category of games, where the main focus is on simulating some aspect of life or fiction" (El-Nasr et al. 2013, 28). Karaoke is simultaneously a *performance* and a *simulation of a performance*. Whether the performer is literally mimicking prior performances or not, they are singing someone else's song, and in so doing they are simulating a performance of that song. Though karaoke certainly allows for alterations to this paradigm (altering lyrics, for instance), such alterations are exceptionally uncommon.

However, karaoke's engagement characteristics rely on simplicity and accessibility, a hallmark of *casual games*. *Casual games* are "games that are easy to learn to play, fit well with a large number of players and work in many different situations" (Juil 2010, 5). They tend to be easy to learn because they have relatively few explicit rules and what rules are defined tend to be extremely simple to follow. Karaoke can accommodate whole rooms full of people yet is flexible enough to be played alone, while maintaining virtually no prerequisites for joining and no preconditions for leaving. It is welcomed anywhere from private homes, to bars and restaurants, and even specialized karaoke boxes, locations meant solely for the purpose of playing karaoke. Yet karaoke is also infinitely adaptable, fitting easily into birthday parties, weddings, bar mitzvahs, casinos, and restaurants. Karaoke accepts anyone from professional singers to incompetent novices. Further, one need not even participate as a singer; at minimum, even "disengaged audience member" is a perfectly acceptable role to play.

Above all else, in karaoke, keeping the play going is the most important paradigm. Couple that with its wholly welcoming accessibility and it's right in line with New Games aesthetics. Like New Games, karaoke eschews competition and conflict in

favor of open and ongoing participation. As outlined by Bernard de Koven in *Creating the Play Community* (1977), such games “aren’t competitive” (42), they don’t “separate people into winners and losers” (42), and they don’t “divide us or measure us against each other” (42). Instead, they invite all to play, encouraging, above all else, play and enjoyment. Indeed, very little can disrupt karaoke. In the course of our research we’ve witnessed drunken antics, poor performances, bad engagement, ignored implicit rules, violated explicit rules, and secondary play occurring alongside, alongwith, or outside of karaoke. None have resulted in much more than a brief rebuke. In fact, more often than not, karaoke simply adapts to it and moves forward as if nothing happened.

The Game of Karaoke

The game itself is made up of a simple set of explicit rules and a complex set of ever changing implicit rules. For it to be a game of karaoke, it only requires one or more players, music stripped of its primary vocal track, a method for delivering that music, and a performance space. As long as those elements are met, they can be manipulated to suit any number of environments while remaining, ostensibly, a game of karaoke. An audience is not required. A KJ is not required. A stage is not required. And no one particular version of the required elements is necessary. Some may use a disc system with paper sign ups, others may use a hybrid system, part paper sign ups, part queue management software, and still others may manage song selection and player queues automatically via more robust software. There’s even live band karaoke, hearkening back to the origins of the game, that has no system whatsoever, managing the queue on a clipboard while providing the music via live instruments.

So, at minimum, karaoke requires the equipment necessary to play music and the equipment necessary for the player to perform. Each version of the game, limitations of the game space, limitations on the Karaoke Jockey’s (KJ) technological competency, or lack of available technologies can influence the mediated elements provided to the player or the KJ. For instance, Pineapple Hill Grill in Tustin, CA owns their karaoke equipment, not the KJ. Further, because the KJ is simply an employee hired to work the machine, there are multiple KJs working alternate schedules across the week. The song library hasn’t been updated since 2012, and most of the KJs have limited experience in actually using the software. As well, since this particular bar has no stage, and thus no specified singing location, they’ve made no investments in microphone stands or other peripheral equipment. Live band karaoke on the other hand, as exemplified by Casual Encounters in Southern California, focuses its entire equipment investment on hardware. Like other karaoke offerings, they make use of standard audio equipment, but they replace the background music system with talented musicians who’ve learned an impressive catalogue of hundreds of songs, with an ever-changing rotation.

Games of karaoke in most establishments tend to begin in the early evening and end somewhere in the small hours of the morning. However, the length of any game of karaoke can depend on how many players have signed up for the game, irrespective of the defined time frame. KJs, for instance, have been known to end shows early if there is poor participation, particularly if the bar is seeing low sales for the evening. Meanwhile, on a Sunday night at the Wayfarer in Costa Mesa, CA, there can be over 60 unique singers, with “second song” opportunities limited to those willing to stay out deep into the night. Collectively, the players at such locations will perform roughly a hundred songs on any given Saturday night.

Explicit Rules

There are few explicit rules in karaoke and most of those are focused on how to participate. At the start of a game, and sporadically throughout, most KJs give a brief explanation in which they set out how to sign up for a song and any caveats to that, though many KJs commonly assume everyone knows how, without much rebuke for that assumption. Some KJ's may address the proper treatment of their equipment, which usually focuses on not dropping the mic, in particular, and the proper treatment of the venue's facilities. Otherwise, the rules tend to focus on when karaoke starts and when karaoke ends. Any other confusion over how to play is handled on an individual basis between the player and the KJ. These additional rules tend to be explicit for that particular KJ but are only noted as the need arises since they aren't normally a source of common confusion during the course of most games. This can include how many songs one may sign up for, how to sign up for multiple songs, whether or not the KJ or venue has access to preferred songs, whether or not the KJ is willing to bump players up in the queue, how much of the KJs' space may be infringed upon, the specifics of how to use many of the miscellaneous materials a KJ might bring (song books, pens and pencils, and even props), whether or not players are allowed to bring a friend up, whether or not players must buy a drink to participate, and whether or not players are allowed to participate while disruptively drunk. Many of these rules were explicitly stated more than once by more than one venue or KJ, but were by no means widespread and were not necessarily repeated by the very same KJs during other instances of the game.

Implicit Rules

The list of potential implicit rules for any one game of karaoke is prohibitively large. Because karaoke exists in the real world, there are any number of standard social contract rules that still apply to karaoke. So while, owing to both New Games aesthetics and common courtesy, a standard of politeness is expected— tipping the KJ, ordering a beer or some sort of food or drink from the hosting establishment, tipping the service staff, being cordial with the other patrons in the space (whether players or not), etc.— these are not explicit rules most of the time and can usually be ignored without much consequence. And yet, most of these “rules” are at the core of a successful karaoke game, thus sometimes they can *become* explicit rules if the KJ or the venue decide to enforce them. As such, it can be more illuminating to note some standard societal rules that are *not* followed during a game of karaoke. First, it's okay to show off. In fact, it's encouraged. Second, though normally discouraged, yes, players are meant to sing in public, loudly. In fact, that's the point. Third, it is perfectly acceptable within the context of the song to swear or otherwise use socially unacceptable words and themes, although some especially taboo pejoratives (such as racial slurs) will still elicit unfavorable responses and a sharp rebuke from the KJ. Some songs known to feature such elements may even be outright banned from performance by some venues or by some KJs. Fourth, if, while in audience to a performance, players find themselves bored of said performance, it is perfectly acceptable to turn away and ignore it until it's over. It is similarly acceptable to enter or leave in the middle of a performance and players have no obligation to clap, even though there is some nagging sense of an implicit rule that one *should* clap for very, very good performances and, conversely, very, very bad performances. And crucially, it is very heavily implied that booing or other negative feedback to any performance is completely unacceptable (unless done by friends of the performer, in which case playful booing seems allowed). This is an example of an implicit rule that quickly

becomes an explicit rule if someone happens to break it, though it takes repeated offenses for any significant consequences to occur. Finally, those who ruin the game through excessive bad behavior, drunkenness, failure to play along in any manner that might spoil others' fun, or interrupting those currently performing will usually result in anything from mild rebukes to expulsion from the game, and likely the space, entirely, depending on the whim of the KJ or the venue. There is also no uniformity between KJ or venue on how to deal with implicit rule violations.

Goals

Following New Games aesthetics, the goals of karaoke are extremely open ended and depend upon the role of the participant. For the KJs, their goal is generally to keep the play going until time runs out. There is a goal that also considers the commerce of the venue, as the venue hosts the karaoke with the assumption that karaoke participation will lead to the purchase of venue services. Ideally, this becomes a self-feeding cycle, in which participation in one leads to participation in the other, and vice versa. This is why karaoke can be so successful in bars, as "liquid courage" helps turn audience members into singers, who then go on to imbibe more and sing more. As for the goals of the participants, there are both myriad and individualized. Having spoken with hundreds of singers and audience members, there is no one definitive "goal" to karaoke. Instead, the consistent statements point to a desire for a feeling of personal success, and a desire to contribute to the overall fun of the experience. For the singers, some simply have a goal of getting through a song, most seek audience approval, others seek developing their singing skill, and still others seek nothing more than the feeling of flow they experience mid-performance. For the singer-audience, their goal is usually surviving the wait long enough to have a chance to sing, though sometimes that fails to occur depending on how busy the night is or how much time the participant has available. For the audience member without singing aspirations, the goal of participation can be constrained to more leisure concerns of passive entertainment or social interaction with karaoke simply providing the backdrop.

PLAY PARADIGMS

The play of karaoke is situated somewhere between Open Mic and American Idol. The player chooses a song, goes on stage when called, and sings into the microphone. However, the songs are not their own, and no one is really there to judge their performance aside from the often placid clapping from the audience. Yet that performance is the most notable play behavior in karaoke. In accordance, the KJ and the venue can heavily influence any performance. A good KJ engages the audience, not just the players, and draws both interest in becoming audience and interest in playing. Key to karaoke play then is also navigating the social aspect of waiting in a queue for their turn at the wheel. Thus, generally part of playing karaoke is playing audience member. And therefore, how players play the game mostly depends on the role(s) they choose. And how the game plays out can be heavily dependant on the community that engages with it because though it takes both talent and skill, it is perceived as amateurish (Tongson 2015).

Playing Karaoke

In all social games of karaoke, active participants choose between playing audience and playing singer. Most types of karaoke feature a third player, the facilitator, in the form of a KJ, whether that player recognizes themselves as part of the play or not, grounded with the understanding that their role is also often a job and thus

conversations concerning work and play would apply. Otherwise, the facilitator role can be passed around just like the role of the singer, with the literal passing of the mic. Regardless, the bulk of player roles is made up of audience members with an ever rotating role of singer available that can be taken up solo or by a small group. Sometimes, in fact, the KJ might invite the entire audience to play the role of singer all at once.

Performance Play

Karaoke relies on performance for its primary method of engagement, turning that performance into social play. As Richard Schechner says in *Performance Studies*, “performance may be defined as ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play” (2007, 89), because play is at the heart of every performance. Schechner says, “Play is intrinsically part of performing because it embodies the ‘as if’” (2007, 89), echoing one of Roger Caillois’s four rubrics of play, *mimicry*, “the pleasure of playing a role, of acting as if” (2001, 8). When one performs a role *as if* they were someone or something else, they are playing. In fact, in parallel thought, Schechner goes further to claim that play is also always performance “when it is done openly, in public” (2007, 89). In acting theory, Stanislavski describes this in terms of the “magic *if*” (2016, 60) whereby an actor acts “as if” (2016, 53), they are a person experiencing the “given circumstances” (2016, 53) on the stage. We see parallels in game studies, including Johann Huizinga’s “magic circle” (2014, 10), later expanded by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004), along with Margaret Mackey’s work on the *subjunctive mode* in which a reader or player steps into the “as-if” (2008, 2) of a work of fiction. Such performances negotiate incredible vulnerabilities that we draw upon to perform, a concept discussed by Lesa Lockford and Ronald Pelias as a type of performative knowledge used when performing without direction, in which “inspiration comes less from the imaginative dwelling within a character or the circumstances, than from his/her affective understanding as a person in an uncomfortable, difficult, or alien situation” (2004, 438). We become, to use their term, “not me” (2004, 438), another form of “as if,” that allows us to explore and move beyond those vulnerabilities.

The recent surge of interest in eSports (Taylor 2012), and live streaming (Hamilton et al. 2014) has refocused the game studies community toward games as a form of performance and spectacle. And though karaoke is a casual game, not a competitive sport, it, too, has related performance paradigms. As such it fits within a tradition of games and performance that pre-dates and encompasses music and rhythm games like *Dance Dance Revolution* (1998), *SingStar* (2004), *Guitar Hero* (2005), and *Rock Band* (2007), which are themselves connected to a long tradition of singing and rhythm games going back centuries (Sutton-Smith et al. 2012). These games enjoyed a brief vogue in the games community in the late 2000s. In 2008 Dominic Arsenault interrogated *Guitar Hero* from the perspective of “simulational fidelity.” And in 2009 Tess Tanenbaum and Jim Bizzocchi considered *Rock Band* as a case study of embodied interface design, drawing on theories of embodiment in cognitive science and movement frameworks from the performing arts. In many ways, the game of karaoke is the source material from which these other music games spring. It’s also having its own moment in game design, from incorporation into various VR social platforms to the VR game *SingSpace* (2017) and Twitch’s first ever video game, *Twitch Sings* (2019), both of which were developed by Harmonix. Each of these recognizes the gameful structures of karaoke, if lacking in the broader sociability live karaoke affords.

And each of the roles one may take in karaoke requires a performance. Most of the time, players are audience members. As audience members, their primary play behavior is mimicking proper audience behavior as if every performance was excellent. However, any audience behavior, from extremely engaged to completely disengaged, is generally acceptable. The only unacceptable audience behavior is negatively disruptive behaviors, like booing or shouting over the singing (excluding encouraging shouting). Otherwise, audience play is little more than queuing up and waiting. Audience members may also certainly engage more, if they wish, by dancing, perhaps, or singing along (as is common). Singers, on the other hand, choose a song and, when selected to sing, come to the mic, if available, and sing along with the music while the lyrics are displayed, usually with some sort of textual color effects meant to indicate the timing of the lyrics. Song choices are generally limited to pop culture songs and mainstream hits, but every KJ has their own song list. Regulars tend to have their standards, a small list of songs they perform every week, and can become venue “famous” for that particular rendition. Similarly there is a stable list of songs that are regularly performed at just about any venue. But song familiarity isn’t a requirement, nor is regular participation. Anyone can act as a singer for any song so long as they understand that, as a singer, their primary play behavior is performing. Not performing can result in their turn being cut short. That said, physical play can be a part of what a singer does and can balance out actual singing requirements. In fact, we have witnessed singers who did not sing but performed physically so well, through dance or silly gestures, etc. that their non-standard approach was accepted. Regardless, players will often satisfy awkward, lyric-less moments through a bit of air guitar, or rockstar dance moves. Otherwise, they fill awkward space with humor or, more commonly, nothing at all. But mostly, they just sing to the audience.

So, while karaoke performances can vary dramatically, we have noticed singers exhibiting a certain sort of performance literacy that falls into one of three rough, non-exclusive categories: (1) those who lead with their voice, (2) those who lead with their bodies, and (3) those who lead with their mind. Those who lead with their voice tend to use their bodies as appropriate for the song, but with much less flourish or playfulness than those who lead with their bodies. They tend to focus fastidiously on mic placement and vocal mimicry, though many with particularly excellent voices tend to conform the lyrics to their own personal style of singing. Those who lead with their bodies, on the other hand, are far more focused on their physical performance. They may or may not sing well, but they definitely love to dance and show off their physicality. Many of these performers like to leave the prescribed singing location and wander the venue, effectively singing directly to various patrons along the way. Those who lead with their mind are often also body-centric, though their true focus is on adopting various strategies for engagement, like humorous actions or song choices, behaviors that rely on sensuality or sex appeal, or pointedly playing a role, like acting the diva, the villain, the Disney princess, etc. They may or may not sing well, but their purpose on stage seems entirely focused on engaging the crowd through a mindful strategy. And performances that elicit the strongest crowd reactions are often those that manage to incorporate all three categories into one. Future work will focus on coding and further identifying these categories. Otherwise, the only other most common “type” of karaoke play is the bad performer whose singing or stage presence or song choice or some other aspect of their performance is exceptionally poor and, as a result, their engagement as a player suffers. However, only pointedly disruptive behavior, or non-performance tends to ever result in stage expulsion. In the role of the

singer, *performance* is paramount, but as with any performance there is no guarantee that it will connect to the audience. We have seen stellar vocal performances go ignored. We have seen dynamic body performances result in little more than raised eyebrows. And we have seen genuine humor fall flat. It seems performance play cannot always be prescribed and may need to be tailored to the audience.

Because karaoke has no defined goals, many players may not have goals in mind that support the kind of play described here. Some sing as a personal challenge and aren't particularly interested in audience response. Some play audience member for social engagement and couldn't care less about the performances themselves. Both the singers and the audience have come to karaoke, but their reasons are varied. Not everyone has come *to play*. Not everyone has karaoke related goals. Not everyone would agree that their play a game at all. And yet, by attending karaoke, whether as unwitting audience, engaged audience, or participating singer, they are involved in a play process (Montola et al. 2009).

Playful Adaptations

Because the explicit rules of this play process are so few, and the implicit rules allow for such a great degree of flexibility, while the goals are so personal, as the major play component is a social performance that simply fulfills the roles of singer and audience, this makes karaoke a very adaptable game. What follows are several examples of this adaptability in action at live karaoke venues.

Gamification and Themes

The simplest and most straightforward adaptations to karaoke are bits of play or playful structures that amount to gamification, of sorts. These adaptations don't tend to impose much on the karaoke itself, or its participants, but simply serve as an added value, though they are often nothing more than a small diversion tacked onto the existing structure. KJs, for instance, tend to add their own bit of playful flair to their shows in an attempt to differentiate, or as part of their own playful behaviors they perform while fulfilling the facilitator role. DJ Chocolate Bunny wears bunny ears and uses various props to entertain the crowd while the player sings. Tony, the KJ at Fountain Bowl in Fountain Valley, CA, rings a call bell on his desk every time singers do particularly well within a song. Kevin Karaoke also rings a call bell, but his is exclusively for when a song's lyrics contain sexual innuendo. Kevin is also well known for playing live guitar along with the players, or to fill out the awkward moments when a guitar solo forces the performer to fill space.

Karaoke's gameplay and simple rules is also such that they are easily transformed into momentary specialty versions. Like *Monopoly*, karaoke is often presented in themes to encourage added value and participation. This can occur in various ways. On Holidays, karaoke is often given a veneer of that holiday to promote festivity. On Halloween, it's often Scaryoke, in which singers perform in Halloween costumes. On Valentine's Day the KJs at one of the venues we observed string streamers around the bar and populate the tables with candies and valentine themed snacks. On Easter Day, the KJ at another location hosted an "Easter Egg Karaoke" in which players could engage in an Easter Egg hunt for prize filled eggs. And Christmas karaokes inevitably feature an overabundance of Christmas themed music, though this is more the players' doing than the facilitators'. But such playful adaptations of karaoke are not limited to holidays. KJs commonly incorporate players' birthdays into the shows, and

bars will commonly feature special nights of karaoke in which they name the game something unique and add a simple splash of discounted drinks and added party games. Some of this can be patronized for the bar. At the Copper Door in Santa Ana, CA, the brewing company New Belgium, in order to advertise their new beer from their Voodoo Ranger brand, gamified the weekly karaoke with entry tickets to “rubber duck races.” And the venue itself can also inform the theme. The Decades Bar in Anaheim, CA, features 80s and 90s karaoke nights, as the bar itself is an 80s and 90s themed bar. Whereas the Swallow’s Inn in San Juan Capistrano, CA, bills itself as a country western bar, so patrons tend to naturally gravitate toward singing country western songs, and country line dancing during karaoke performances is common, though the karaoke itself is not explicitly country themed. KJs can also wield their system counterparts in order to play a particular version of karaoke often called Karaoke Roulette in which players provide their song lists to the queue, but who sings to which songs is randomized by the system. Another version of this completely randomizes the song choice according to any and all songs in the KJ’s system. So while gamification is one route, the most common method of adapting karaoke is through added themes. And this themed system of karaoke adaptation can pass well beyond specialty evenings, even becoming subsumed into other play cultures and play practices.

Nerdy Karaoke

The Geek Easy, in Orlando, FL, features “Nerdy Karaoke,” an example of a venue-themed adaptation taken seriously enough by participants to result in a more unique karaoke experience because the theme evokes the values of a community. The Geek Easy is a games and comics enthusiast’s bar. It’s connected to a comic book shop and is decorated with video game and comic book references. There are silhouettes on the walls of Goku and Superman fighting, little Super Mario question blocks for lamps, and TVs set up near the entrance hooked up to old consoles featuring nostalgic games. And the karaoke itself is seemingly much like any other, except that song choices tend to lean toward nerd culture, which results in a karaoke show that oscillates between emo bands and musical theater, a unique combination. Sign up is also unique in that it is handled entirely through an in-phone app, with a sign, up by the KJ, with instructions on how to use the app (though players can also go directly to the KJ with requests). There is a distinctly playful attitude to this karaoke that seems to resonate from the nerd culture vibe. This can be seen in a couple of ways. Poor singing quality is consistently met with incredibly exuberant encouragement from the crowd, resulting in song recoveries under circumstances that have otherwise resulted in quit performances. Second, song alterations are well received here. We’ve seen song alterations before and, if humorous, they can go well, but are otherwise met with disengagement. Instead, here, they are cheered and encouraged. One such alteration even replaced the entirety of a song’s lyrics with the player’s personal tribute to his Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming community, an alteration met with raucous applause. Such modifications of the game of karaoke echo musical practices within fandom communities (Jenkins 1990, 148-179) and machinima (Lowood 2008, 25-42). Nerdy Karaoke is a themed adaptation created not by the facilitator, really, but by the culture of the community attending the game. This culture subsumed the karaoke and injected it with its own ethos. This happens emergently at many themed bars, but the KJ and the community can make it pseudo-official and distinct.

Trans-Lucent and Furry Karaoke

At Executive Suites, a well known gay and lesbian nightclub in Long Beach, California, there are a couple of iterations of themed karaoke that are developed around existing communities, created by the venue for the purpose of promoting community engagement. One such theme is “Trans-lucent - Transgender Night” focused on providing the transgender community a night of their own at the bar. While the karaoke itself is fairly standard, though admittedly featuring a higher frequency of LGBTQ themed songs, the play around that karaoke makes it unique, with dancing on the second floor of the bar, and many drag show-esque karaoke performances. This themed karaoke is different from the themed karaoke previously discussed in that the theme isn’t really promoting a variation on karaoke play but is instead meant to promote community engagement, using karaoke as the “fun activity” people come together around. In fact, ultimately the karaoke is nothing but a side game to a much bigger night of community togetherness.

The same could be said about the other community focused variant featured at this venue, called “Furry Karaoke,” hosted during so-called “Tail Parties” in which participants in various stages of Furry dress take the stage to engage in often animal-themed karaoke singing. However, this particular community is a play community so Furry Karaoke takes on some new features. The most visible change, of course, is that many of the singers are dressed in elaborate costumes. These costumes vary from badged players, who simply wear an image of their “fursona” on their body to signal their involvement with the community, to Pups in leather BDSM themed outfits and dog masks, to full Fursuits, which are similar to mascot costumes, though they can be far more elaborate, with many puppeteered articulated parts (Liu 2017). Much like during Trans-Lucent, during Furry Karaoke there’s dancing on the top floor with karaoke on the ground floor, and the basement is kept available for anyone who needs a space to change their outfit. Both the outfits the players wear and the associated relationships signified through community engagement have a role to play in Furry Karaoke. For instance, it is very common for players of this karaoke to sing animal-themed songs related to their particular fursona. Interestingly, many players have fursuits with articulated jaws that move when they sing, making the experience of watching these singers a bit surreal. And many of these players have interconnected relationships; pups often have masters, many fursuits are clearly made as pairs, etc. One master brought his pup up on stage with him and sang “How Much Is that Doggie in the Window?” while his pup sat obediently. One couple consisted of some sort of furry maroon dragon and her knight. When she went up to do karaoke, her knight stood guard in front of the stage, his back to her, attempting to prevent anyone from getting too close. Like Trans-Lucent, these Tail Parties are about community engagement, offering their community an opportunity to be free and be themselves for a little while. This play community then injects the space and the karaoke with their own play behaviors.

Kinky Karaoke

This very same thing happens at a particularly complex version of karaoke called “Kinky Karaoke” played monthly at The Sanctuary, a private club and BDSM dungeon in Los Angeles, CA, in which a BDSM community hosts an open invitation to participate in “light” BDSM play while playing karaoke, advertising to potential players, “Come BEAT some BOOTY while friends sing to the BEAT of their favorite song!” Like Furry Karaoke, the purpose of this karaoke is to bring a community

together, but here the karaoke is used to help initiate those new and/or curious to the BDSM scene to play parties by offering a play activity less intense and more familiar. This simple shift, incorporating karaoke into the larger world of BDSM play, made for some interesting adaptations. First, because this play community is built around notions of consent and communication, this karaoke begins with a long list of explicitly stated rules—largely focused on the dos and don'ts of the location and the limitation of interpersonal engagement in this particular space—and ends with a sort of group check-in and farewell, a nod toward the BDSM practice of aftercare. Second, this is BDSM play in a BDSM dungeon, which means people in various stages of undress, screams and shouts heard all through the evening, and various forms of physical pain all throughout the space, including up on stage, during performances. Finally, this also means that the karaoke was in service to the BDSM and not the other way around. So when the room was suddenly pin-drop-silent as the stage was overtaken by a collaring ceremony, nobody blinked an eye. When karaoke starts, it rarely stops, no matter what happens around it, until time is up. It usually takes an emergency to stop it, and even then the bumper music still plays. But at Kinky Karaoke, during a collaring ceremony, karaoke stops, completely. This adaptation fully incorporates its themed world, allowing rules and behaviors to change how the karaoke itself functions. And yet, the karaoke remains karaoke, replete with all the Rocky Horror performances one could imagine.

CONCLUSION

Karaoke seems to be a uniquely positioned game for other games to incorporate into their preexisting play. Along with the previously mentioned Nerdy Karaoke, Furry Karaoke, and Kinky Karaoke, anime conventions are well known for hosting karaoke nights that are effectively Cosplay Karaoke featuring a wide assortment of J-Pop and K-Pop music. Karaoke on college campuses can often become International Karaoke as students from all over the world join together to play, introducing each other to their cultures' music. There are also a number of isolated examples of enmeshed play across various venues: Eastside Luv in Los Angeles, CA is well known for featuring "SelenaOKE" and "MorrisseyOKE" (among others) on Wednesday nights; Prohibition in Murray, UT, features burlesque karaoke at their appropriately themed 20s style bar; until the summer of 2017, a California karaoke bar had, for twelve years running, featured weekly "Porn Star Karaoke" in which porn star industry vets would indulge in some team building karaoke; Glen Eden Sun Club, a nudist resort in Corona, CA, features weekly nudist karaoke in which all participants must perform in the nude; and in Portland, OR, Devil's Point features "Stripperaoke" in which players perform on stage while accompanying strippers perform right along with them. The various forms and combinations that can come to make up a game of karaoke seem endless, and yet the karaoke itself maintains internal integrity.

We argue that this adaptability arises from karaoke's ubiquitousness, its relative lack of explicit rules, the flexibility of its implicit rules, the personal nature of its goals, and the variability of its primary mode of play. This creates a loose structure that can take in other structures, be incorporated by them, or even completely consumed by them, yet remain recognizable. Such a structure not only facilitates variability in play, it also promotes emergent play behaviors with a take-all-comers attitude. This makes it ideal for incorporation into play communities, because the play behaviors of the community can easily be added, and yet it is also easily adapted to serious settings to lighten the mood, like at office parties. Further, because performative play is the play

of identity, it allows play communities a unique opportunity to play their identities in a public space, using the expressive potential of music and the “as if” structure of the game as a support system. Karaoke is a simulation of performance held together by as few rules as necessary to make casual community engagement possible, providing a critical lens for considering intentional design interventions toward community inclusion through identity performance.

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